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ABSTRACT

The Kerner Commission was critical six years ago in its assessment of media coverage of black problems, and eight case studies conducted in Philadelphia indicate that news media may not yet be effectively meeting the needs of some blacks. In January 1974 interviews were held with eight residents in a section of north Philadelphia characterized in 1970 census tract data as 90 percent black and defined by the Philadelphia Model Cities program as an urban slum. The comments were divided into six categories: complaints about alleged excessive emphasis on bad news about north Philadelphia, the effects of the emphasis on bad news, problems of pitting whites against blacks in the media, superficial reporting, the lack of media crusades against social problems, and the problems of identifying and covering black leaders. (Author/RB)

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EIGHT CASE STUDIES OF COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN A BLACK, URBAN SLUM

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EIGHT CASE STUDIES OF COMMUNICATION

PATTERNS IN A BLACK, URBAN SLUM

> . . . the news media have failed to analyze and report adequately on racial problems in the United States and, as a related matter, to meet the Negro's legitimate expectations in journalism. By and large, news organizations have failed to communicate to both their black and white audiences a sense of the problems America faces and the sources of potential solutions. The media report and write from the standpoint of a white man's world. The ills of the ghetto, the difficulties of life there, the Negro's burning sense of grievance, are seldom conveyed. Slights and indignities are part of the Negro's daily life, and many of them come from what he now calls "the white press"—a press that repeatedly, if unconsciously, reflects the biases, the paternalism, the indifference of white America. This may be understandable, but it is not excusable in an institution that has the mission to inform and educate the whole of our society. . . .
>
> The Commission's major concern with the news media is not in riot reporting as such, but in the failure to report adequately on race relations and ghetto problems and to bring more Negroes into journalism. . . . Disorders are only one aspect of the dilemmas and difficulties of race relations in America. In defining, explaining, and reporting this broader, more complex and ultimately far more fundamental subject, the communications media, ironically, have failed to communicate. [1]
>
> —National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968

The Kerner Commission was critical six years ago in its assessment of media coverage of black problems, and eight case studies in Philadelphia indicate that news media may not yet be effectively meeting the needs of some blacks.

Interviews were conducted in January 1974 in a section of north Philadelphia characterized in 1970 census tract data as 90 percent black, [2] and defined by the Philadelphia Model Cities program as an "urban slum." [3] The eight persons interviewed lived in north Philadelphia, and most worked there at the time of the interviews.

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Each of the black respondents was active in the Philadelphia Model Cities program; five were men, three were women; they ranged in age from 30 to 61; and their occupations ranged from store clerk to businessman.

Persons active in the Model Cities program were interviewed in the hope that they would have a better idea of the problems, needs, and desires of persons in the community, and that they could better relate those feelings than individuals less active in the community.

An open-end interview schedule was developed before the interviews were undertaken, but in most cases the taped responses ranged far beyond the boundaries established by the questions. Nevertheless, all questions on the schedule were asked in each interview.

Comments were divided into three major categories: media preference and influence, media criticism, and changes recommended for news media. Before proceeding to an examination of the comments, however, two caveats will be discussed, and the media situation in Philadelphia will be described.

Two Caveats

First, this writer is not suggesting that the opinions of eight persons is reflective of the views held by all other persons who live in the slum section of north Philadelphia in which interviews were conducted.

The comments were interesting, however, and they could provide some basis for further research. Opinions expressed here, furthermore, are worthy of consideration by persons in positions to make changes in media coverage of the urban slum, and the role and present actions of media which cover news in an urban setting could be evaluated with these comments in mind. The comments are presented as a possible stimulus for thought, not as a foundation for policy changes.

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Second, it should be noted that the views expressed here are those of readers and viewers. No effort was made to obtain the views of newsmen who work in Philadelphia and cover north Philadelphia.

It is likely that media personnel in Philadelphia have good reasons for doing some of the things the respondents criticised, and it is clear that deadlines and other pressures would make it impossible to implement some of the suggestions or to eliminate some of the problems outlined here—given the current structure of news media in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia's Media Situation

Philadelphians are served by three very high frequency television stations with network affiliations, a Public Broadcasting Service station, five ultra high frequency television stations, 21 AM and 22 FM radio stations, three daily newspapers, a black newspaper published twice a week, and numerous weekly, bi-weekly, and monthly publications.

Of the three commercial VHF television stations, KYW-TV, the NBC affiliate, is owned by Group W—Westinghouse Broadcasting Co., Inc.; WPVI-TV, the ABC affiliate, is owned by Capital Cities Broadcasting Corp. of New York; and WCAU-TV, the CBS affiliate, is owned and operated by CBS.

Among the 43 radio stations which serve Philadelphia, two—WHAT and WDAS—are "black oriented," although they are owned by whites; one—KYW—is an all-news station owned by the Westinghouse group; and one—WCAU—is predominately a news station, although some entertainment content is aired. All other stations are predominately entertainment oriented.

Three daily newspapers published in Philadelphia are The Evening Bulletin, circulation (according to Editor & Publisher Year Book) 611,634; the evening Philadelphia Daily News, circulation 250,697; and The Philadelphia

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Inquirer (morning), circulation 450,293. The Inquirer and the tabloid-size Daily News were purchased by the Knight chain in 1970 from Walter H. Annenberg's Triangle Publications, Inc. The Bulletin, as it proclaims on the page one flag each day, is "independent-locally owned."

The black community also is served by The Philadelphia Tribune, an independently owned twice-weekly publication founded in 1884 (circulation 37,554); a Philadelphia edition of The Afro-American, a weekly newspaper published in Baltimore; and a weekly Philadelphia edition of the New Pittsburgh Courier called the Philadelphia Courier Black.

Media Preference and Media Influence

Persons interviewed for this paper were asked how persons in the north Philadelphia community get most of their news about what's going on in Philadelphia and in north Philadelphia specifically—through radio, television, newspapers, talking to people, or where—and to indicate why one source of information may be more popular than another source.

Numerous investigators (e.g., Greenberg and Dervin, Allen, Sargent and Stempel, and Williams and Lindsay) have documented the heavy reliance of the urban poor on broadcast media, so emphasis here is on determining why one medium may be more preferred than another.[4]

In the second part of this section, responses to the question, "Are newspapers, radio, and television influential in the north Philadelphia community?" are explored.

Reasons for Preferring One Medium More than Another

Reasons given by respondents for preferring one medium more than another ranged widely; some reasons had to do with the nature of the different

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media, some with the perceived fairness of the media, and some with the availability of different kinds of news in mass media.

One woman, who felt the use of certain kinds of broadcast media stemmed more from the nature of the media than from a greater confidence in the content of the news presented, said:

> But, the reason I say radio and television [are most preferred], radio in particular; the people who are housewives, the people who don't work--in particular housewife--you can have your radio on, you're washing your dishes, you're cooking, you're listening, you can get a lot of news. You can take your radio with you--to the bathroom even--and get a lot of news.

Another comment which indicated that the preference for one medium more than another may stem more from the nature of the medium than its content was made by a man who said: "For news purposes, my family usually watches the Group W Eyewitness News. They usually do a pretty thorough job. You know, they present their news coverage along with the corresponding film clips. In essense, they make it pretty interesting."

Broadcast media, however, gain support not only because the nature of the media makes them easier to use, but apparently because--as several persons mentioned--film reports at the scenes of some news events are perceived to be more fair than newspaper reports of the same events. One man expressed the view this way:

> But, as far as fairness of reporting of the news is concerned, I would say the most fair media would be radio or television because they show it just like it is, even though they do edit a lot of it. But what they do show, it's just the way it is, whereas any newspaper can always print what they want.
>
> And I do know for a fact that a lot of newspaper reporters who have been given good stories--and who have covered stories, and have submitted it--it has been cut out. They weren't allowed to print it. I would say television gives the best picture of what is actually happening in the community. And even it has a tendency to delete or cut out.

But newspapers are not without support among the eight persons inter-

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viewed here. "I think more people pay more attention to newspapers and read newspapers than people really realize," one woman said. "I really do. If you don't believe it, go by trash day and see all the papers in the trash."

It may be, in the view of at least three respondents, that the newspapers serve a supplementary—rather than a primary—information role. One woman expressed a common view when she said:

> Like if something happen, and you'll come up, say, we'll run you down to the corner to get the Daily News to see if it's in the Daily News, you know like that.

> I'm giving my opinion on the basic people that I work with, and that is the very lower class, not the middle class and all like that. They don't do that much of reading—as far as literature and all. Like I say, if somebody got hurt, or this person died, they'll run to the Daily News, because they get the Daily News every day for the mortalities.

It appears that the mass media in Philadelphia sometimes take second place to the grapevine because some kinds of news are not covered, or they are covered inadequately—in the view of some persons interviewed here. In fact, one woman said that ". . . the grapevine comes first [as a news source], because, you know, rumors carry. It's one of the largest communications out here." A male respondent supported her view, saying:

> There's a lot of things that happen in your community that you don't see in the newspaper or in your radio or TV coverage—on your television coverage. And it's not related.

> I know incidents like dope is heavily pushed in the north Philadelphia area. Now, there've been two or three killings concerning dope, and the local coverage that we got from the news medium or the television wasn't anything, and most of this news was transferred through the neighborhood through the community. You know, people telling other persons. They [individuals who see things happen] tell other people and other people just pass it on. Like they meet people at the stores, the corners, or bars, or stuff like that. And they just tell them incidents that happened.

Another man emphasized the importance of word-of-mouth communication, but at the same time questioned its reliability, when he said:

> I would say that the majority of people—depending on the type of news it is—if it concerns something that happen in the community, I think

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that they get it through word-of-mouth. I mean, through their neighbors. I think this is where it mostly goes. News is spread.

How accurate it is, I don't know. It's a question of—by talking to people—what they might add or subtract from it. Depending on what side they [persons who spread news by word-of-mouth] would be taking, too. See, like if it's an incident that would concern the police, they might add a few words if they didn't get along with the police, or if they did get along. There might be pro and con to the police.

Other important sources of information are circulars, sound trucks, and regular community meetings. Circulars and sound trucks are considered to be more reliable means of getting information to the people than sending press releases to the press, according to two respondents, "Especially if you want to call a mass meeting in the community, you use sound," one person said. "This is the one sure and fast way of getting it done." Of the community meetings, one respondent said:

Most of the information that is discussed and problems of schools is gotten to the community by our home and school meetings, or either it's discussed in a community meeting that want to do something about helping that particular problem. In many cases, when the newspaper put it in there, it's distorted. It's not the way it is. They have really overplayed it.

Media Influence, Power

It appears from the responses of the eight persons interviewed that the media, at least in Philadelphia, can have a great deal of influence—when they decide to exercise it. The reason why media appear to be influential, however, apparently does not always stem from accurate and fair reporting, but from a rather blind faith in what newsmen say. As one man said:

It [Philadelphia news media] does have a decided, you know, influence on the way some people think, because a lot of people think that some editors and some news columnists can't tell a lie. You know, they think whatever they say is gospel truth. Because a lot of times when you say something to a person, the first thing they'll say, "I read it in the newspaper—so and so said it."

I'd have to say that it [news media] does have a lot of influence on,

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> I would have to say, the majority of the people in north Philadelphia because the majority of them are not capable of, shall we say, analyzing the news and taking into consideration that another human being wrote that. So it doesn't necessarily have to be so. But I would say, overall, that the news media—the radio and the television—does have an influence on the people in the community.

Another man supported this rather negative view of the power of the news media when he said:

> The news media in general carries an awful lot of weight in this town as far as policy is concerned, as far as the position that people take in regard to any particular issue. In essense, they could distort the news and give you false opinion of what's going on, and the public would generally buy it just by virtue of the fact that the Inquirer, the Daily News, and the Bulletin said so.

But if the news media are influential simply because they are filling a void that no other information sources are filling, as most persons interviewed believe, they remain optimistic about what the media could do if they tried. One man expressed the optimistic viewpoint this way:

> Certainly, the north Philadelphia community can use all of the support that both television, radio, and the newspapers can offer because once the attention of all Philadelphians are focused on north Philadelphia, then I think that interest would improve to the extent that most of the respective governments—local, state, and federal—can feel safe in spending some more money in order to do a turnabout in this segment of town. . . .
>
> More space. More coverage. You know, I have never underestimated the power of the news media—whether it be radio, television, or the dailies. They are in a position, in my opinion moreso than anyone else, to reflect public opinion and to manipulate public thinking and there's no doubt in my mind that if our dailies saw fit to crusade in behalf of the revitalization or rejuvenation of the north Philadelphia community, that it would go a long way.

Media Criticism

All eight persons interviewed expressed some negative opinions about the news media—radio, television, and newspapers—in Philadelphia, and about their coverage of events in north Philadelphia. Those criticisms are broken down into six main groups: complaints about an alleged excessive emphasis on

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bad news about north Philadelphia, the effects of the emphasis on bad news, problems of pitting whites against blacks, superficial reporting, the lack of media crusades, and the problems of identifying and covering black leaders.

Excessive Emphasis on Bad News

Perhaps the most serious complaint voiced emphatically by all eight persons interviewed was that the news media personnel who decide what news to cover place too much emphasis on what they call the "wrong kinds of news" and not enough on what they see as the "right kinds of news."

Each emphasized that north Philadelphia is not being helped, and in some cases is being harmed, by persons making what they called the wrong news judgments. "Most of the coverage that they give to the north Philadelphia area is unfavorable anyway, to the majority of the people who are law-abiding citizens," one man said. "They give an image to the rest of the people about the people in north Philadelphia."

A woman, also criticising the emphasis on bad news, said the image created about north Philadelphia typically is negative. "There are many people who live in north Philadelphia," she said, "who have good jobs, who are respectable people. We all don't play up the bars. Right away when you say you come from north Philadelphia, 'Augh.' People look at you like you're some monster or something."

A man expressed much the same opinion, but in a slightly different way, when he said:

> The news media doesn't place the same emphasis on the importance of news as north Philadelphia sees it. See, like if a boy goes to school during the day and gets out of school and comes home, and works, you know, during the evening, and then does this on an ongoing basis, that's no news.
>
> But if a boy hookies school and goes out and breaks, you know, some windows on the turnpike or takes potshots at railroad cars, well, that's

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news. They publicize that, because it has a tendency to sell more papers than a boy doing what a normal boy should do. Actually, when you look at it, there are more good boys than there are bad.

Another person accounted for the alleged over-emphasis on bad news by pointing to the economic structure of the mass media and their needs for wide circulations and large audiences. He said:

I would say that the newspapers, radio, and television are insensitive to north Philadelphia as such. Because the basic news that they print is news that they feel will sell newspapers [or, he said moments later, attract listeners and viewers].

There are a lot of things that are good going on in the community that you don't hear about, that you don't read about, unless the particular agency or the person involved makes it known. The newspapers don't seek it out. Anything that's what you might say, controversial or that's, shall you say, a financial asset to the newspaper as such—that they will go out [and report] and they will exploit that type of news in this area.

Actually, you'll find more destructive news than constructive news. Because for some reason or other the news media is not inclined to show the good points of what's happening in north Philadelphia. Particularly, it's been labeled a jungle and they tend to try to justify the application of that label.

Another respondent expressed much the same sentiment when he said:

I think that the black community in north Philadelphia can certainly benefit by less news of violence. It's unfortunate that violence sells newspapers, but the fact of the matter is that there are so many other areas of concern that a newspaper can devote its space to, and still sell newspapers.

A woman interviewed said the reason for the emphasis on negative aspects of life in north Philadelphia may stem from something other than the need of newspapers to sell newspapers and the need of television and radio news programs to attract wide audiences. This is what she said:

The same incident could happen in a school in north Philadelphia, the same incident could happen at Northeast High School—you would not hear about that. Bad things, I'm talking about. Negative things, I'm talking about. You would not hear about that. A same positive thing that could happen in north Philadelphia that happened up Northeast—identical positive thing—you would hear about it.

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I think it's a racial thing because I talked with some students. A few years back we were doing some surveys on students in various parts of the city, trying to find out their grade levels, and what subject materials were being used, and the behavior of students. And we took a sampling of students from all over the city.

And Northeast students then told me that it was dope up there in the northeast high schools, and said that kids had been knocked out with it in school. The police had come--it never got into the paper. If the police come in one of our schools down here and take out a kid with dope, somebody makes sure it get into the paper. I definitely think it's a racial thing.

Another respondent said that part of the problem of reporting the more positive aspects of life in north Philadelphia is that the news media really are unaware of what is going on. "I think newspapers could not bring this to the attention of the public if they are not aware of what's going on themselves," she said. "And I'm sure they're unaware."

Effects of Bad News

All of the respondents said that negative publicity can harm or even destroy positive efforts to improve the community. "But the thing is," one man said, "that as you're working to try to develop the neighborhood and develop people--all this goes by [unreported]. And all the work you put in goes down the drain when one person, you know, slips a little bit."

Each individual related an incident in which he or she felt good work was "down the drain" because of a negative story by one of the media. One woman said, for instance:

Now, we have fellows coming down [to north Philadelphia] from prison [to work in a community redevelopment center], right? Now, nobody will say anything. Say, one fellow come out and do something to one of the communities--then it'll be in the paper, you see what I mean?

And they remodeled the house--which was $43,000--and that's a lot of money in this kind of neighborhood. None of this was mentioned.

But you let one fellow come out and get overdrunk or, you know, do anything--he don't even have to really hurt somebody, but get drunk, and

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> have to get arrested or, you know, disturb the peace. Then they'll say that "He belongs to this center," and such and such a thing.

The negative effect of the alleged emphasis on bad news manifests itself in another way, however, and it is considered dangerous by all the persons interviewed. Each, without exception, felt that media coverage of gang activities in north Philadelphia (41 juveniles were killed last year, and four have died in gang-related murders this year) is inadequate. "I can't get no kind of coverage if it's something that the kids really got theirselves together," one woman said. "But anytime we have any kind of gang problem, I got news medias down, I got TVs down. And we refuse to talk to them. Because I don't think they're helping us any."

Some respondents claimed that news media not only are failing to help find solutions to the problem, they are in fact contributing to it. As one woman said, "I think this is one of the things that keeps the gang problem rolling. It's all the publication that's been given to them by the newspaper. I, for one, am against it—the publicity they get. Any publicity."

A man supported her view when he said:

> It [coverage of gang violence] creates a problem for a lot of the good boys when they see the boys that are not good getting all the attention, you understand? And this is one of the problems with the gangs in the neighborhood. The boys are looking for identity. You know, they want to be known, and a lot of people don't recognize them, so they go out and do something so that they become recognized.

Each person expressed the view that the news media, with their alleged excessive emphasis on bad news, help perpetuate the problem of gang murders, and most gave concrete examples of the ways in which gangs are influenced by media coverage. Three of the examples are recounted here. The first is from a woman whose son grew up with a rather famous gang member in Philadelphia. She said:

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You probably have heard of Cornbread, who had his name scrawled around everywhere. He was a very prominent gang member. Don't you know you would meet boys--you'd say, "What's your name?" [They'd answer], "I'm Cornbread." Because they looked up to Cornbread; Cornbread was like an idol. The Philadelphia Inquirer Sunday Magazine had done a story on Cornbread and his activities.

Now, Cornbread grew up with my son. They never did a story on this other young man that grew up at ____, that went to Franklin [High School] everyday, had no gang problems, graduated, and is in college. They didn't do no story on him. Eighteen years old. Never been arrested. Never had a brush with the law. They didn't do no story on him, so why should they do a story on Cornbread?

So kids begin to think, "Well, if my name is scrawled all around, and if I walk up and threaten somebody or shoot somebody, my name's going to get in the paper."

Another woman related this story:

In my particular area, which I live in [Model Cities] area hub ____. I'm the ____ there. I'm a community-wise person. I've been there for years.

The boys this summer were not at gang war. They were peaceful. They were athletically minded because they were participating in the summer program activities. And all of a sudden, on a Sunday, this fellow comes up with this big two or three page notification that the Zulus were this, the Zulus were that, and the next day the boys were--they were in turmoil. So I really don't think this is right.

And then he came up Monday with his camera and his crew and they was going to shoot these pictures and the boys told him they didn't want any parts of him. I went down and talked to them and told them, "You don't need this. Tell him you don't need it. You're at peace, you're going to stay at peace."

It [the publicity] makes them feel great, I think. "I made this paper--the next time I may make the Inquirer. Who knows, I may make the front page on the Bulletin." It's the scandal that these newspapers cover.

One woman described the impact of news media coverage of gang violence on the members of a gang which had been relatively peaceful until a violent incident occurred and was reported by local news media. She said:

The first thing you hear them [gang members] say is, "I'm going to get a body." Like we had 15th and Oxford [gang]--you didn't even hear of them, they were very quiet. And one of the fellows got killed. Then they were

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supposed to have killed a policeman's son. And for one week straight they was in the paper. And they were a big gang. You know what I mean?

The boys were there all the time. And nobody know nothing. And they had a redevelopment where they worked with [a local school and church] and all, but we didn't get the publicity we need. They really stopped gang warring. They had their own club. They had their money in the treasury. Nothing happened.

But just as soon as something happened for one week they were in the paper. You see what I mean, like if a paper had played up what they were trying to do, and give them a little encouraging, they would help a lot. So that makes 15th and Oxford a big gang. So now the Valley--if they do something worse than 15th and Oxford, this makes them a bigger gang. So it doesn't help it. I think it does put a little of gasoline on the fire.

Blacks vs. Whites

Two persons interviewed said news media often attempt to maximize the racial aspects of some situations involving black newsmakers and white newsmakers. One man, for example, said that burglaries and muggings typically are ignored by news media, except under one circumstance:

If it's--usually--on a white person [mugging by a black individual] or something, they'll blow it up because it's a racial thing, or it turns out to be a racial thing. Because anytime they pit one against the other, it's news.

You take the incident of where the white student at Temple got killed [in spring 1972]. How much paper coverage? I mean, look at the gang violence we have. They cover it, but right away it's dropped. They don't follow up the cases. Was the guy caught? Was he convicted? But in the case of the white student, it might be today you get some information, next day, next week. But a black kid, they get it one day and then forget about it.

Another respondent noted that blacks in north Philadelphia often work with children, helping them solve problems with gangs, family relationships, schools, and other things, but that few stories appear in the news media which report that a black individual is helping a black child.

But a lot of times, we'll see in the newspaper or television--we'll see a black child being helped by a white person. But I mean, it's hard

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> to see where a black child is being helped by a black person, and I do know that they do help them, see. And so, it's not newsworthy, but they do it. And when they put it in print, they'll put a white person with a little black child that she helped, this and that. But everyday, I see plenty of black people helping black children and it's not reported in the paper.

The man offered two possible explanations for what he saw as unfair treatment by the news media:

> Well, it might be because the news media is run by the whites, or they don't think that it's worthy to see that a black person is helping another black person. They figure maybe it's their obligation--or they're supposed to do it anyway. And it's not newsworthy. But they figure that if a white person does it, they're doing something out of the ordinary and they'll print it.

Superficial Reporting

Some respondents alleged that the news media not only fail in many cases to report the news which they think should be reported, but that the reporting sometimes is superficial--for good news as well as for bad news. One woman, for instance, criticised newsmen for reporting only what happened at an important meeting, and not attempting to gather additional information.

The example she gave related to a meeting of the Philadelphia School Board, in which the busing of black students into white districts was discussed. The meeting was televised, and more whites attended the meeting--primarily to protest the plan--than blacks.

The woman said few blacks attended primarily because, "we actually don't know what is going on in our school system." Furthermore, she said:

> I think the community and parents have gotten to the place now that this desegregation thing, I think, is a lot of talk. They've been talking about it for years and years. I feel that even white people that resent our kids from coming up in their community have said to themselves, "Well, this ain't going through."
>
> We feel that when we're invited to serve on a committee to help to make plans, that the system got the plans all made up anyway. And

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people feel that they're only wasting their time going to those meetings. And I think people felt the same way last night--that they're only wasting their time going to the board to holler and scream and object to that plan because the board's going to do--in this case--probably going to do what they want to anyway, which is not going to be very much.

The woman said the local news media left the impression that the desegregation plan was supported by no one because little support was voiced for the plan at the school board meeting. She said, however, that the media should have done more to report the story adequately:

> Don't you think they could have ran a survey to find out [what the black community thought of the proposal]? Would that have been difficult? The schools that were affected were listed in the paper. So if they had that in the paper, I see no problem with them contacting these schools to get some input on the feelings of the community on either side as far as the busing was concerned. I see no problem.
>
> If they wanted to find out, they could find out things. If they had been more concerned about playing up the desegregation plan and really helped to do something positive about it. They find ways of doing anything else they want to do.

One person interviewed expressed the belief that even the coverage of bad news, which she objects to, is superficial in that some aspects of the situation often are ignored. She said:

> They could also add to these [stories] things that they never add to them when they write some negative things. If we had the same type of facilities, the same quality of schools, same quality of education that other kids have. You don't never see anything about that in the paper. The kids down here would not be any worse than the kids anywhere else--which they're not any worse. Really.

Media Crusades

One criticism of media coverage of the news of north Philadelphia was that stories which respondents considered worthwhile are dropped after one or two days, and that the stories are not picked up again for many weeks or months. As one man said of the problem:

> They [media] could be [helpful in solving problems], but you can't start something and drop it. You would have to follow through with it.

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> I think that if they would give it enough coverage, it would reach the people, see. And it would probably start a chain of events. But I think that it has an influence in the community to make changes, if they would emphasize it. I mean, not just once or twice and then forget about it.

The old-fashioned media crusade for an issue or against a social or political ill is not as common as it once was, but some respondents suggested that the old-fashioned crusade may be the best way the media can help solve the problems faced by slum residents.

"There're a lot of people who have these problems," one man said, "and they need to be motivated. A lot of them have been turned off at one time or the other and they have the impression that, "Oh, what good is it going to do? It's not going to do any good." One man mentioned that a crusade might help lead to solutions to the city's gang problem:

> I think they could do a better job [with the gang problem]—the dailies. They could do a better job just by virtue of develing realistic space and trying and attempting to arouse the anger of the citizenry enough to rid their own community of the gang element.
>
> Or by virtue of arousing them to the extent that they'll put the type of pressure on city council and the state legislature and the governor's office and on Washington to the extent that people in authority will get the message and say, "Hey, we're going to have to address ourselves to this problem down here because the voters are saying that this is what we want."

Identification and Coverage of Legitimate Black Leaders

An important problem in reporting news from the black community has been one of identifying leaders in the community. Many respondents interviewed here contended that the Philadelphia news media don't do a very good job of finding true leaders. One man cited a specific situation in which the wrong person often gets the coverage:

> A lot of people you hear hollering "police brutality." But this is not the majority of the people. This is only a minority, and most of the

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people who holler police brutality are the ones out there committing crime or going bad. So they're hollering just to get the police off their back.

But the majority of the people you hear say, "All right, let's stop the dope. Stop the fighting and everything." They're the majority out there—they're the ones who are being injured. They're the ones who want the help.

And the first thing you see, the newspaper will pick up—somebody said "police brutality." Well, this might be one of the hoodlums out there himself and the newspaper will print this and this guy will come out and say something to the newspaper and right away he's a "spokesman" or "leader," you know, in the community and he could be nothing but a hoodlum or something. And they just take it for granted that this guy's speaking for the community, when he's not. Because the majority of the people, they don't say anything, but they would like for the policeman to come in and stop the crime, stop the dope pushing, and like that because it's committed against them. They're the ones who suffer the most.

It's been known anybody can come in. You take a gang leader, he can come in and he's got five, six people in back of him. He can follow up and say something and they say he's a leader or something like that. They don't actually find out, "Is he really a leader, or do the community respect him, or is he in the community?" They don't even bother to find out.

All they want is something that makes news at that minute or that hour and the rest of it is forgotten. I don't think they actually go out of their way to find out: "Is this guy a legitimate spokesman as far as this community? What does he do in this community?"

Another respondent, a woman, supported the contention that news media sometimes do not tap true community leadership for information, when she said:

The people who can shout the loudest are people whose name has been thrown around a few times for doing something they've done somewhere. But as far as the real leaders in the community, you seldom read about them in the papers. I mean the ones that are really committed—making, bringing about changes in the community.

When I say people that are really committed to this, I mean people that you can't sell down the drain. They are not in it for money. For instance, we have some pretty strong community people in our community that was bought out. For instance, if I talk too much and know too much, the board's going to give me a big job.

But there are other people that are different from that. They are not

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going to accept that big job because they are really committed to do something about changing the community.

One man addressed himself to the problem of black leadership and the problem of getting the leadership and the reporters together:

> You take in the community, there's a lot of blocks that are organized, see, and they elect block captains. These people are leaders. We have community programs in there where people meet, and, I mean, I don't see the newspapers cover these meetings. Sometimes they're asked. There're certain instances where they've been invited to participate, but they don't participate.
>
> They wait, and if it's not a large crowd, an unruly crowd, they figure it's not worth printing. But if you only have a small group meeting or a small group demonstrating, they don't bother to cover it. But if they figure there's going to be trouble or something, they'll be right there.

Another problem with regard to black leadership, some respondents argued, was that black leadership is sometimes covered by the news media in a way that they consider unfair. As one man noted:

> A lot of times they'll try and discredit people who are black leaders. See, if they get a hint of a scandal or something, the newspapers will go right in and, you know, print this and everything else. Well, this does hurt because it tends for, say, the people in the community and the people outside of the community to lose respect for them.

Another respondent discussed the problems which arise when the news media report news and it later turns out to be incorrect:

> They don't come back and reprint a retraction or a follow-up story about what he's doing in the community and everything else. So now, the paper has started a rumor or this type of thing, and they haven't come back to clear it up or anything. So people, actually, when they have leaders, the papers tend to discredit them by scandal, you know—whether it's true or not.
>
> This information has come out—they don't try and find out whether it's true or false and everything. They get a hint of it and they blast it in the paper and television. Then they forget about it. It's news for that day and then they forget about it.
>
> But what happens afterwards? You know, do they come back and say, "Well, this man is an upstanding citizen" and everything? Like when he's in trouble, they have the paper on him, the camera on him and everything. Hell, if he's exonerated, go to his house now and put him in the paper and everything and let the people know.

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Changes Recommended for News Media

All persons interviewed were rather critical of the news media in Philadelphia, and all suggested ways in which media coverage and operations could be extended or improved to better meet the needs of persons who live in north Philadelphia. The recommendation made most often, certainly, was that bad news should not be emphasized so vigorously. But there were other suggestions.

In this section, comments are divided into three subsections: news which perhaps should be covered but isn't, the necessity to find the right kind of black personnel, and the need for new sections and better fillers.

News That Isn't Reported, But Perhaps Ought To Be

Respondents were asked if any kinds of news content were being under-reported or ignored, and most were able to name specific kinds of stories which they believe could be better covered by the news media. Interestingly, not all of the news mentioned was the kind of positive news they said they wanted. In fact, two men said that more emphasis should be given to the problems faced by north Philadelphia residents. One man said:

> I would think that certainly with the problems that north Philadelphia has—and the residents of north Philadelphia have—I think it would be a great service if the newspapers, and the radios and the television media would devote more space and time to exposing some of the problems that especially north Philadelphia area faces.

Another man felt the same way, but he expressed the problem a little differently:

> Anything that happens in the community, it's important to a person in the community, because to rectify your problems, you must know about them. And if you don't know about them, these things go on.
>
> What did they say years ago? They thought that when the black people were treated badly, or seated in the back seat of the bus or something:

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"Well, we thought you were satisfied because you didn't say anything. We didn't know." Well, this is what I'm saying, see, we don't know. So if you don't know or bring up your problems, the majority will say you're satisfied--which you're not.

Specific kinds of news needed and desired by persons in the north Philadelphia community, one man said, include information about where persons can go for help in solving specific problems which confront them, without having to travel all over the city.

> The problem is that a lot of people in Philadelphia have problems and they are not aware that there is help available to them without charge even. So they are rather hesitant, and that's why now and then you'll pick up the newspaper and you'll see where somebody's been flim-flammed or somebody's been overcharged or somebody who's been in need of services and just practically, may as well say, died from neglect because they didn't know where or to whom to turn to for help. So if this type of information is given more publicity with the knowledge that there's no charge on this type of information--it's for free--things will be better.
>
> Just to give you an example--the potholes in the street. There was a lady who had a pothole in front of her house on 19th Street, which is a busy street. Even late at night, any car or truck hit that bump and it would shake the whole house. And she really didn't know what to do about it--her nerves were bad.
>
> And one day, I happened to be passing by and she just stopped me and said, "Mister, is there anything I can do about that pothole in the street?" And there's a number that you can call for potholes. So I told her, "Call that number." So she called the number, and must have been a week or so later I saw her and she thanked me. And she said, "I got help the very next day." So they came out and they fixed the pothole.

Each respondent also mentioned that the news media should provide information about important meetings scheduled in the community and about issues which would affect persons in north Philadelphia. One man argued that the publication of meeting times and places could have beneficial results in that persons in the community would ". . . maybe go down there and maybe see what it's about and I could maybe [speak] with my experience on this side and yours on that side--maybe we could pull it together."

Most pointed out, however, that the method of publication could be crucial. One woman, for example, expressed a typical opinion when she said:

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If people saw that in the Bulletin, or the Inquirer, or the Daily News the date of the meeting, the subject, rather than back in some little corner or somewhere, [that would be helpful].

A lot of people have a fashion of reading headlines. If they put that in nice bold headlines somewhere, rather than in a little corner somewhere, and really say to the community, you know, "You better be about looking into that Homesteading Act—it's not what it's supposed to be," I'm pretty sure that they would.

Others argued that the results of meetings and speeches should be published and that often they are not, even when the speech or meeting is important to the community. One woman, for example, said:

I don't remember seeing anything—I scanned through it, I didn't look real hard through the paper—for the affair that I was coming to Wednesday night—the Urban League's annual dinner. Now, the Urban League is nationwide, it does a lot of things, and their national president was here for the speech—Vernon Jordan—plus the fact that it was a very big affair.

I don't believe there was no news coverage of it. I'm not sure, but I didn't see anything in the paper about it yet. And I do understand that somebody did ask them about it and they said, "Well, around six o'clock we're very, very busy," and said, "We'll do our best to get out there." I think Vernon Jordan's whole message should have been in the paper.

Most respondents knew of material other than that coming from meetings and speeches which they thought should be reported. Most were programs being run in the community which were of benefit to residents of the city.

One man, for instance, pointed out that news of the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency, a state agency that provides grants and loans to students in need, should be publicized. Students are eligible when their parents' income does not exceed $15,000 annually. "Virtually everyone within this particular segment of town would qualify," he said. "I think this is news that's worth knowing about."

Another program considered worthy of publicity was described by the man who runs it:

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> In my particular position with the plumbers union, the steamfitters union, [I'm] out here trying to find--trying to get--the minority young men interested in a trade--which was at one time very hard, very hard to get into. But now, at this particular time, they have the opportunity. And how many do I find that actually wants to follow through--to become a mechanic in the plumbing and steamfitting fields. It's a good trade. It's a good trade. . . .
>
> But you never hear anything about it. Nothing. None whatsoever. If I don't get out there and do it on my own, you never hear about it. Never.

Another woman felt that a program to distribute Christmas baskets to the needy in north Philadelphia was worthy of publicity, saying, "that to me is a human interest story--that you are still caring about people."

Finally, two individuals mentioned stories--one in which the respondent was personally involved--which they believed should have been reported but were not. One of the stories was described this way:

> I know that a lot of policemen are being dropped and fired for these crimes [crimes allegedly committed by members of the Philadelphia Police Department]. But this is what the Police Commission don't want known. But why don't the news media tell the public this? I mean, then they know that--even though it's quiet--they are being dismissed from the force. A lot of people figure, "He's a policeman, he can get away with it." But a lot of times they're quietly just edged out.
>
> I think that if the public knew that these people are being edged out--that they're being fired, dismissed, and everything--that there is a chance, you know. I mean, the newspapers could say some of the police are dismissed, but they don't print this news. Why? It makes it bad? But I think it would make it good because if people know that if a policeman--he's like anybody else--if he's wrong, get rid of him. It's like in the Watergate-type, Agnew. If they're bad, get rid of them.

The other story which went unreported, but which at least one north Philadelphia resident felt shouldn't have, is described in the woman's own words:

> On Wednesday night, I got into a Yellow Cab in Center City, and I think that's very important. And the door was rather hard to open and the cab driver refused to open the door for me.
>
> After I got in, he took my address, and I asked him if his union prohibited him from extending courtesy to people. And at that point he asked me to get out. And I told him, no, I wasn't going to get out, that that was a public vehicle, and I was not going to get out until he took me to my destination.

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And he insisted that I get out and I refused. Then he tried to get someone on his telephone in his car, and he couldn't. Then he walked around to the door and opened the door and said, "Madam, will you please get out, because I'm not going to take you anywhere."

And I told him as dangerous as the streets were in Philadelphia, that "Dammit, I ain't going to get out of here."

So he walked up the street and I looked around, wondering what he was doing. I thought perhaps he was going to call his supervisor. And in five minutes time—I really think I'm exaggerating when I say five minutes—there was a blue car and a patrol wagon came up with three officers [all white]. And one of them was a big tall officer—the other two were like medium size men—opened the door and ordered me out of the cab.

I refused to get out. I told them, I said, "What are the charges?" I said, "Why should I get out? This is a public vehicle. He accepted me in here, now why does he want me out?"

And they said, "Come on, madam, get out."

And I said, "I'm not going to get out." And I went in my bag and took out my pencil and I started taking his number. And I said, "The mayor's going to hear about this. I'm going to report this."

At that time they calmed down and started treating me a little more humane and said, "Lady, would you please get out? We only want to talk to you."

When I got out they told me that because the cab driver had said because I was antagonizing him that they were doing their duty by seeing to it that I got out of his cab. But I also had the right to take the number off the cab and report it to the Yellow Cab Co.

What annoyed me so was that they only took five minutes to come and I didn't hesitate to tell them, I told them: "I am a respectable, middle-aged woman, worked for the police department for 14 years, helped to organize the Police Community Relationship Organization, and the 23rd police district. Goddammit, when I call you up at ____ and ____ Ave., it takes you 15 minutes, 20 minutes, a half an hour and, dammit, sometimes you don't never come.

"But here a respectable citizen who go out maybe once or twice a year, sitting in a cab, here you come and [take] five goddamn minutes to throw me out."

I said: "The mayor's going to hear about it. [Philadelphia Police Commissioner Joseph] O'Neill's going to hear about it. All the papers is going to hear about it." I just took the badge number of the police and I had the number of the Yellow Cab. They tried to calm me down, but I was just so mad. . . .

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> And in my neighborhood, I'm not kidding you, I have called those police, my neighbors have called. My block is pretty tightly organized. If something happen, I'll call; then I'll call my next door neighbor; then she'll call; then she'll call somebody else to, you know, tell them to call. And you think they come? When they get good and ready.

The woman, 61 years old, did carry through on her threat to notify the press about the incident with the cab driver and the police, but she was less than satisfied with the results, as she explained:

> When I called the Daily News, I talked with a man who took my story and said that he was going to see what he could do about it. He didn't promise me--nobody's promised me--to put it in the paper.
>
> When I called the Bulletin, they asked me to write my story as I had told it to the lady, and it would get in the editorial. As a matter of fact, both papers said it would be in the editorial. Probably. They'll see what they could do. Probably. I guess it wasn't what they wanted.
>
> And the Tribune was quite interested in the fact that Yellow Cab refused me, but I was surprised that they did not show more interest in the action of the police department. Because I thought that if they really played that up, that might at least scratch the surface and do something to the black community and let them know that Center City does get this service. For no reason at all. The cab driver didn't say I was attacking him or anything. He said I was being antagonizing. And they're waiting for some more information from me.
>
> They insisted that I go to Yellow Cab and talk with somebody [they didn't offer to make the call], and then come back or call them and let them know what the results of it was. I didn't have any promise whatsoever of it really getting into the paper.

For the woman involved with the white cab driver and policemen, the incident was an example of the insensitivity of the local news media--including the black Tribune--to the needs of persons living in north Philadelphia. As she said:

> For instance, the story that I just told you--how do they know that I am capable of writing this story? How do they know how much it's going to inconvenience me to get down to the newspaper office to tell this story to them? They're really not sensitive to the needs of the people in north Philadelphia. Or either they don't give a damn.

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Black Personnel

Many news media have, in recent years, begun to hire more black personnel, in many cases to cover news of the black community. The trend may help solve some problems, as some persons interviewed here said. "I think they would be more sensitive to the needs of the community," one man said of black reporters, "basically because they at one time or another lived—if not in north Philadelphia—then in [a community like north Philadelphia]—and they recognize the problems that the black community is faced with."

Some respondents, however, were not so certain that the addition of black personnel would solve many problems. As one said:

> Even if they had black reporters, you know what I mean, there are still assignments and everything. The editor, would he cross it [news of blacks] out and everything? Guy says, "I got a story here," and the editor looks at it and says, "Well, this won't make print."
>
> So you get a black reporter and then they say, "We don't think that's important enough." And maybe it isn't, nationwide, but as far as the community is concerned—it affects the community, it's important to them.

And a woman respondent pointed out that persons sometimes change after leaving the community to work in other areas:

> I feel that you take the Tribune and WHAT—they do know the problems. Maybe they don't want to deal with it. And then we had a class—like the man says—when you were poor, you really were. And when I came up everybody was poor, so everybody looked better until you get to the middle class. Well, at the middle class, you don't have time to be worried about each other.
>
> I think it's a lot of people [who] came up very poor, know what our problem is and then turn their back after they get in a position to help. I don't think that putting more people from north Philly or black people on the paper would do any good because we got enough black people in key positions from north Philly. There's enough people in spaces that know our problems. They're just so involved in their own problems—or they're thinking they got out of this class and all like this here—and they don't care.

One woman said that it really isn't so important that black reporters cover black news—that the important thing is for reporters to ". . . stay

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flexible to the situation, you know, that people are in. It doesn't make a difference who you are or where you are. I just think you have to be flexible, you know. Be able to communicate and be able and willing to go into any type of environment." She continued:

> I think the women [reporters] are more aggressive than the men, though. The reason I say some of the women reporters are more aggressive is because they put themselves into where the people are—it's just because they're flexible with the type of environment that they're in. So, therefore, I think they manipulate better, don't you?

New Sections, Better Fillers

Some of the individuals interviewed suggested that the news media could make some changes which might improve communication from the media to the residents of north Philadelphia. One man, for example, suggested the creation of a section for news of the area:

> If they could, say, reserve a certain section, say, for a certain reason. I mean this would be of permanent in the paper, you know, and then people would, say, know that they have this news about the community, and even if they didn't want to read the paper they would look for this certain area. Because they know that it's covering the north Philadelphia area, and important news to the community. And, you know, the people could, say, turn to their page. And then the articles wouldn't have to be big because a lot of news would be confined on this page.

The suggestion received some support from a woman who said:

> They [readers] are elevated and trained to read nothing but violence because that's all we get, but I feel that—like I said—it is news whatever happens. But if you would, say, take one inside page with a little paragraph such and such a thing. I think people would start looking for it, you know, to see what new projects are developing—what new leading citizen, leading class of people, anybody did [to start] a new project. I really believe they would start looking. The first time they're not accustomed to it, you know what I mean? We are now programmed to read nothing but bad news.

Another respondent suggested a different, perhaps more effective, use of newspaper fillers and radio and television flashes:

> If everywhere they had a filler they would put these—not just the one notice, but a series of notices or information—[items] saying

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> such and such a thing is happening at such and such a place or call this number for such and such a thing, [it would be helpful]. And it'll have to be done on a continuing basis. It'd have to be done every day, so people would get used to it. Same thing on TV. Even those flashes on TV. You'd be surprised how people look at those flashes on TV.

Conclusions

Conclusions based on information from eight case studies are easy to draw, but difficult to believe in. It is suggested, therefore, that the "conclusions" presented here be considered as suggestions for further research and thought, and not as recommendations for change in the news coverage of urban slums. The suggestions are:

1) Bad news from the urban slum should not be downplayed, necessarily, but the slum should be treated fairly. If bad news from a slum area is reported, but bad news from other sections of the city is ignored, the fairness of the coverage should be evaluated.

2) Bad news should be kept in perspective. Persons from slum areas do commit crimes, and that should be reported, but ways should be found to show that the majority of the slum dwellers oppose criminal activities and support efforts to reduce crime.

3) Special pains should be taken to avoid superficial and, therefore, misleading reporting. If news sources don't go to the reporter, then the reporter should seek out the sources. Newsmen should consider the use of social science research methods to gather information.

4) When news media recognize a political, social, or economic injustice, they should consider launching an old-fashioned crusade to correct it, or at least give the problem continuous coverage for an extended period.

5) News media should exert special efforts to find out who the real black leaders are, and beware of those who shout the loudest but who may have

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no following. Consideration should be given to the possibility that persons who live and work daily in the community are the true leaders, and that their opinions are important.

6) Rumors and charges directed against black leaders should be carefully checked and verified before being disseminated, and, when the inevitable mistakes are made, corrections and retractions should be made immediately and sincerely.

7) Consideration should be given to the publication of seemingly mundane, but--to the community--important, information about where one can go for help in solving financial, medical, legal, and other problems at minimum cost.

8) Sufficient staff should be provided to check out complaints made by urban slum dwellers who believe they have been flim-flammed, embarrassed, or victimized by "the system."

9) Black personnel should be hired, but they should be hired with care, as skin color doesn't always mean that one is sensitive (or insensitive) to the needs of the people.

10) Special sections should be created in newscasts and newspapers for news about the urban slum.

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Footnotes

[1] Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, abstracted in Michael C. Emery and Ted Curtis Smythe, eds., Readings in Mass Communication: Concepts and Issues in the Mass Media (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1972), pp. 465-466.

[2] Population Characteristics: 1960 & 1970 Philadelphia Census Tracts (Philadelphia, Pa: Philadelphia Planning Commission, July 1972).

[3] The area in which interviews were conducted is part of the Philadelphia Model Cities program, and therefore is classified as an urban slum. Areas eligible for Model Cities funding ". . . should be substantially hardcore slums in which low-income families are concentrated and which are characterized by overcrowding, poverty, unemployment, dependence on welfare payments, low educational and skill levels, poor health and disease, and crime and delinquency." The definition is found in the publication: Improving the Quality of Urban Life: A Program Guide to Model Neighborhoods in Demonstration Cities (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, December 1967), p. 5.

[4] Bradley S. Greenberg and Brenda Dervin, Use of the Mass Media by the Urban Poor (New York, Washington, and London: Praeger Publishers, 1970); T.H. Allen, "Mass Media Use Patterns and Functions in a Negro Ghetto," unpublished master's thesis, University of West Virginia, 1967; Leslie W. Sargent and Guido H. Stempel, III, "Poverty, Alienation, and Mass Media Use," Journalism Quarterly, 45:324-26 (Summer 1968); and Frederick Williams and Howard Lindsay, "Ethnic and Social Class Differences in Communication Habits and Attitudes," Journalism Quarterly, 48:672-78 (Winter 1971).